IN THE CLAIMS

1. (Currently Amended) A computer-based method of automatically controlling an inventory of items, the method comprising the steps of:

at least one broker device automatically collecting information relating to a status associated with at least one inventory item from one or more sources; ~~and~~

the at least one broker device automatically accessing at least one electronic marketplace, wherein the electronic marketplace comprises an electronic trading network site, the broker device accessing the electronic marketplace in order to: (1) obtain information to determine one or more optimal parameters, based on the collected status information, to be used for replenishing the at least one inventory item via the at least one electronic marketplace; and (2) order a quantity of the inventory item via the electronic marketplace from a provider of the inventory item; and

the at least one broker device one of aggregating and deaggregating multiple orders for the inventory item associated with the one or more sources so as to minimize an overall purchasing cost attributable to the multiple orders.

2. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein the electronic marketplace accessing step further comprises monitoring at least one of pricing and supply trends associated with the at least one electronic marketplace on the at least one inventory item.

3. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein the one or more optimal parameters comprise an optimal time to acquire the at least one inventory item via the at least one electronic marketplace.

4. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein the one or more optimal parameters comprise an optimal quantity of the at least one inventory item to acquire via the at least one electronic marketplace.

5. (Canceled).

6. (Canceled).

7. (Original) The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of automatically generating an alert to an individual that an order may need to be placed for the at least one item.

8. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein the step of automatically collecting information further comprises collecting usage pattern information associated with the at least one item.

9. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein the step of accessing the at least one electronic marketplace further comprises gathering information on a market condition associated with the at least one inventory item.

10. (Original) The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of automatically generating a recommendation of at least one of a different brand and a different type of an item to a consumer of the inventory.

11. (Canceled).

12. (Canceled).

13. (Currently Amended) The method of claim 1~~1~~, wherein the one or more sources comprise an embedded sensor system ~~is embedded~~.

14. (Canceled).

15. (Currently Amended) Apparatus for automatically controlling an inventory of items, the apparatus comprising:

at least one processor operative to: (i) receive automatically collected information relating to a status associated with at least one inventory item from one or more sources; and (ii)

automatically access at least one electronic marketplace, wherein the electronic marketplace comprises an electronic trading network site, in order to obtain information to determine one or more optimal parameters, based on the collected status information, to be used for replenishing the at least one inventory item via the at least one electronic marketplace , and to order a quantity of the inventory item via the electronic marketplace from a provider of the inventory item; and (iii) one of aggregate and deaggregate multiple orders for the inventory item associated with the one or more sources so as to minimize an overall purchasing cost attributable to the multiple orders; and

memory, coupled to the at least one processor, for storing at least the collected status information.

16. (Original) The apparatus of claim 15, wherein the electronic marketplace accessing operation further comprises monitoring at least one of pricing and supply trends associated with the at least one electronic marketplace on the at least one inventory item.

17. (Original) The apparatus of claim 15, wherein the one or more optimal parameters comprise an optimal time to acquire the at least one inventory item via the at least one electronic marketplace.

18. (Original) The apparatus of claim 15, wherein the one or more optimal parameters comprise an optimal quantity of the at least one inventory item to acquire via the at least one electronic marketplace.

19. (Canceled).

20. (Canceled).

21. (Original) The apparatus of claim 15, wherein the at least one processor is further operative to automatically generate an alert to an individual that an order may need to be placed for the at least one item.

22. (Original) The apparatus of claim 15, wherein the at least one processor is further operative to automatically collect usage pattern information associated with the at least one item.

23. (Original) The apparatus of claim 15, wherein the at least one processor is further operative to gather information on a market condition associated with the at least one inventory item.

24. (Original) The apparatus of claim 15, wherein the at least one processor is further operative to automatically generate a recommendation of at least one of a different brand and a different type of an item to a consumer of the inventory.

25. (Currently Amended) A system for automatically controlling an inventory of items, the system comprising:

at least one sensor operative to automatically obtain information relating to a status associated with at least one inventory item; and

at least one computer system, operatively coupled to the at least one sensor, operative to receive the status information and to automatically access at least one electronic marketplace in order to determine one or more optimal parameters, based on the collected status information, to be used for replenishing the at least one inventory item in accordance with at least one provider of the item via the at least one electronic marketplace, and to one of aggregate and deaggregate orders for the inventory item so that an overall purchasing cost is minimized.

26. (Original) The system of claim 25, further comprising at least another computer system, operatively coupled between the at least one sensor and the first computer system, operative to serve as a gateway.